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On My Side

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On My Side

My mother went to exactly one parent-teacher conference throughout the entirety of my education. It was my sixth grade year; every year before and after that, the conferences didn't fit into her busy schedule. She worked an incredible amount, and traveled very often for her job. Repeatedly for months on end, she'd fly out of our home airport, Chicago-O'Hare, early Monday morning, returning home late Friday night or in the predawn Saturday, only to do it all over again in 48 hours. Despite her busyness, she went to great lengths to ensure that I was doing what I needed to do to learn. Having received a third-world education herself, she was a huge proponent of the many opportunities schooling provided. Since we rarely saw each other in person during the week, she would call me on our home phone every night; one of her first questions was invariably, "What did you learn at school today?" She was as involved as she could be, without being an overbearing omnipresent PTA mom, and I respect her for it to this day. It never worried me that my mother could never come to parent-teacher conferences, nor do I think that my education was hindered in any way. By all realistic measure, she didn't need to meet with my teachers; she was a teacher's dream parent in terms of caring about their child's education.

In sixth grade, it worked out that she could finally come to a conference of mine. I was quite excited, given that my mother was going to see my school and meet the teachers that I had been working so hard for all year. She'd left work early that day, and had called me earlier to let me know at what time she would be home. She knew we'd be cutting it close as far as making it to school before conferences ended; our hope was for her to meet and talk to as many of my teachers as possible in the limited time she'd been able to allot at the end of the conference schedule. The plan was the usual one when we were on a tight schedule: she'd call me from the car when she got into our neighborhood, and I'd lock up the house and be waiting for her when she pulled in the driveway. When the white Nissan arrived, I gave the house's back door one last shake to make sure it was locked, and I climbed into the car.

We arrived at the school and I guided my mother to my classrooms and teachers. I was excited to introduce her to the place where I spent so much of my time. We went to my math course, where Mrs. Thompson spoke highly of me; to my social studies teacher, Mr. Murphy,

who commented on my diligent work; and finally to my English classroom, taught by Mrs. Hildy. Mrs. Hildy and I had all the groundwork laid for a good teacher-student relationship; I was a voracious reader who loved to write, and she taught the subject that dealt with those things. I performed well in her class, and had no reason to dislike her. I was prepared for the night's final parent-teacher conference to go as well as the others, if not better.

Hildy's classroom had been rearranged slightly for conferences, with a small round table placed near the front, surrounded by three chairs. My mother and I sat close together, facing my instructor. The two women, opposite each other, were strikingly different pictures of the female professional. To my left was my mother, a no-nonsense woman who commanded respect in her dark business suit and conservative jewelry. My teacher, by contrast, sat across from her in a gray hooded sweatshirt with the school logo on the front, an outfit piece thoroughly supplemented by jeans and gym shoes. My mom's short salt-and-pepper hair betrayed her age, while the younger woman's hair was longer and would remain as it was for many years before she considered dyeing it. Even their hands were different as they passed papers between each other. My mother wore only one ring other than those from her engagement and wedding, and her hands looked slightly weathered, typical for her age. Hildy's hands were more youthful, and a finger was rare without a ring on its adjacent at the minimum. She smelled flowery, airy, and very young. My mother, by contrast, wore a perfume that was less sticky, a heavier, more professional scent. It wasn't overpowering, with an androgynous musk as opposed to my teacher's almost sickly sweetness. I paid minimal attention to the meeting itself; I had little reason to, given my expectations. Mrs. Hildy told my mother about her class, about what papers we'd written throughout the year, and what my grades had been. She gave my mother copies of grade reports, and generally conducted the meeting as if I wasn't there. Other teachers had made a limited effort to involve me, but Hildy made no attempt beyond acknowledgement. That was fine; the conference was for my mother, not for me. It wasn't until the meeting began to come to an end that my teacher brought up what had been on her mind throughout her time with me, saying,

"Your son is a good student, as we discussed." She paused, searching for a tactful statement through which she could make her point. "But I'm worried that he isn't making friends." Her eyes flicked to me, as if she expected some sort of response. I gave her none, not because I was denying emotion on any sort of principle, but because her statement surprised me.

My mother and I had the same objection, but only one of us had the power to address the issue via inquiry. "What makes you say that? My son talks about his friends all the time."

“I misspoke. I more meant that he doesn’t seem to do what everyone else does when they have free time in class. Every chance he gets, he’s pulling out a book.” What she said was absolutely true – at every opportunity, I’d take out a book I’d brought with me from home or checked out from the library, and I’d read. Even if the break was only a few minutes, I would read my books. I simply loved to read, and I took every opportunity to do what I loved. Though my book reading was astonishingly consistent, I was not one to separate myself from a group or avoid others. I would not hesitate to turn around and chat with other students, nor was I afraid of public speaking. I knew I wasn’t antisocial, and I was taken aback when my teacher seemed to say otherwise. I was astonished further still that she pointed to books as being the root cause of my apparent problem. I could recall schools stressing the importance of reading ever since the skill was first taught, and my passion for books had been praised at every level. Yet at that moment, I sat across from someone, an educator, who was telling my mother that I should read *less*.

My mother had a reaction only the best could have asked for: she cracked a smile and exhaled that sharp rush of air of someone hearing something that bordered on humor. To her, even the implication that a student could read too much was ridiculous. She had consistently encouraged my reading from the beginning, and she continued to do so in that moment. She gathered her things and said to my English teacher, “I’m not going to tell my son to stop reading.” There was no anger in her tone, no malice. It was simple fact; amusement still lingered on her face. She thanked my teacher for her time, and we left the classroom. The black metal door shutting behind us with a dull thud was the only sound to accompany our footsteps as we walked down the hallway back towards the front of the building. Nothing was different; I struggled to keep up with my mother’s fast pace, but that was usual. I didn’t need or want her to change anything because I knew in that moment that what my mother had done was right, at least on a personal level. In that moment, my mother had gone to bat for me. She defended what she saw as a positive thing, the pursuit of knowledge. She continued to emphasize the importance of reading books for years, and always encouraged me to learn and discover things through literature. At the time of my sixth grade parent-teacher conference, I was grateful was grateful that my mother supported me. As time passed, that gratefulness came to be in conjunction with a great respect. She made many personal sacrifices for my sake, but one compromise she would not entertain would be one that inhibited my learning. She wanted what was best for me, and she was always on my side.